

Mediating the Pandemic in Jakarta: New Digital Platforms in a Time of Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The mediascape in Indonesia is highly diverse and pluralized. Citizen activists have long used new media as a means of political engagement. Some examples include the use of e-mail discussion groups and online forums to bring down President Suharto in May 1998, and the use of WhatsApp groups by Islamic groups to bring about the downfall of the then governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (more commonly known as Ahok) in 2017. Indonesian citizens have proven to be early adopters of digital technologies, the nation is one of the most active social media users in the world, and Jakarta is widely considered as the Twitter city; citizens are digitally literate and are politically engaged through a variety of media. Digital media and new online platforms play vital roles in the so-called processes of democratization. This article looks specifically at two emerging media platforms, *Project Multatuli* and *LaporCovid-19*, as means to explore the ways in which citizens can continue to pluralize and democratize the mediascape in (post-)pandemic Indonesia. In this article, we look at how our informants have navigated their livelihoods, family life, and careers in pandemic-era Jakarta. Crucially for Evi of *Project Multatuli* and Irma of *LaporCovid-19*, this has involved initiating the use of new platforms to circumvent, counter, and mitigate the shortcomings in available media, governance, or health care provision. The paper draws on Vigh's use of the term 'navigating' to refer to the shifting terrain in which actors must determine which networks to utilize, which skills to deploy, and how to manage temporal unpredictability. The pandemic, which continues to fluctuate in waves, necessitates a nuanced and shifting response. This article seeks to place the varied responses of Jakartan-based actors in the context of these dynamic circumstances.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, digital platforms, mediation, precarity

INTRODUCTION

The media, argue Sen and Hill (2006), have always been present during Indonesia's revolutionary moments. The advent of digital media in the late 1990s was one of the enabling factors that helped bring about President Suharto's demise. Indeed, stifling the print media had been one of Suharto's standard methods for maintaining a sense of orderly public sphere. Numerous words were invoked to describe this desired atmosphere: *aman* (safe), *tertib* (orderly), *tenang* (calm), *kondusif* (conducive), and *biasa-biasa saja* (normal). This was juxtaposed with undesirable situations of that which were *rawan* (dangerous; susceptible to violence), *provokatif* (provocative), *hiruk pikuk* (lively and noisy), *kacau* (chaotic), that which could *mencemaskan masyarakat* (make society anxious), or that which was capable of *mengancam stabilitas negara* (threaten the stability of the state). The anti-Suharto and pro-democracy *reformasi* (reformation) movement which advocated democratic governance used email chat groups and online forums as means for mobilizing support which culminated in the massive student-led protests of late-1997 until the dramatic and bloody days of May 1998. The reviled and heavy-handed figure of the Minister for Information Harmoko fell along with Suharto, and the newly installed President Habibie dismantled the much-despised Ministry of Information. Some of the aspirations of *reformasi* were seemingly quickly realized with the burgeoning of press freedom.

Almost 25 years after this landmark moment, the trajectory of democratization has remained problematic. Tapsell (2017), for example, argues that digital developments have allowed for both media oligarchs and anti-oligarchic media actors to make gains. Indonesia's media are not at the proverbial crossroads, but numerous strands are developing simultaneously. The crossroads metaphor regularly deployed by *The Economist* news magazine to frame Indonesia misses the array of tensions which are both emerging and converging. As Mietzner points out, President Widodo has brought his seeming rivals from religious and populist-nationalist camps into his fold through having made Mar'uf Amin his vice-president and Prabowo minister for security (2020). While Widodo came to power partly on the strength of his political outsider status, his two-term presidential era has been marked by "democratic regression" (Power and Warbuton, 2020).

Writing in the early 2010s, Lim (2011) was optimistic about the role of digital media in being a continuing viable means for "mobilizing social movements and advancing human rights and social justice" (24). The flipside of this digital capability, however, was the way in which conservative groups mobilized to bring down the then-Jakarta governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama in 2016. A vital source of agitation against him was a doctored video which represented him as having blasphemed Islam. Indeed, Lim (2017) notes the emergence of tribal nationalism during Jakarta's gubernatorial election that is produced through the formation of online "algorithm enclave." The algorithm enclaves facilitated the circulation and mobilization of racist and sectarian narratives in the digital-based media. The ease of digital production was thus an enabling attribute of a post-trust politics. Distrust

in governmental institutions such as the Komisi Pemilihan Umum (General Election Commission) was also promoted by the defeated presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto in 2014. In response, Kawal Pemilu (Election Watch) was founded as a means to scrutinize and test the veracity of the election's results. This citizen-led, open-data project drew on the contribution of some 700 volunteers (Graft et al. 2016). As an open data project, it can be seen as a forerunner to COVID-19 projects such as Kawal Covid and LaporCovid; the second of which we will consider in this article.

When the COVID-19 Pandemic hit Indonesia, we had already felt (along with other commentators) that many of the hopes and dreams of the reformasi era had only been partially realized or were severely under-threat. The New Order political elite had remained in positions of authority; media moguls had capitalized on the new digital mediascape. The COVID-19 Pandemic, however, became a complicating factor in recalibrating Indonesia's democratization as well as further encumbering State services with adequate health care provision. According to Mietzner, the Indonesian state underperformed at the start of the pandemic in comparison to similarly positioned nations, yet this inadequacy was not simply related to 'regime type' or 'development status' (2020, 229). This state's inadequate response during the pandemic was significantly felt by citizens at grassroot levels. They had to rely on a variety of social networks, personal connection, association, and modalities to cope with the various impacts of the pandemic on their lives.

During the pandemic narratives of disinformation, hoaxes and fake news circulated both on online and offline media platforms (Rahmawati et al. 2021). The proliferation of 'fake news' was enabled by the paid buzzers who supported the government and further polarized the digital conversation on social media platforms (Pambudi et al. 2021).

These narratives shaped the way in which health, governmental and religious authorities responded to the pandemic. During our fieldwork in Jakarta in 2022, we discovered that some residents were still affected by the circulation of this 'infodemic' on digital platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, and/or Hello applications. This is especially the case in lower-middle class families since their livelihoods were severely damaged by the social restriction imposed by the government. To mitigate the declining democratic conditions and to counter the disinformation regarding COVID-19, many citizen-led websites, Instagram accounts, Twitter accounts, Facebook forums, and WhatsApp groups have been initiated. Paid buzzers have also become active in support of President Widodo. In this article, we consider two kinds of media which provide critical interventions in the 'backsliding of democracy' and the concomitant rise of misinformation and hoaxes. The examples we look at are the Project Multatuli and LaporCovid, which were both founded during the Pandemic Era. We consider these platforms through the work of their founders, Evi Mariani and Irma Hidayana.

CARING AND GRIEVING

The pandemic had precipitated new modes of mourning. And Evi, like many Jakartans, was having to learn to mourn while following health protocols. Having just returned from the crematorium, Evi and her relatives gathered online to mourn the passing of her father. The rising tide of COVID-related deaths in the middle of 2020 brought with it a whole host of other problems: a lack of coffins, a backlog of bodies to be cremated, the urgency to clear land for new cemeteries (Wijaya 2021), and, perhaps the most harrowing, mourning the loss of loved ones while in isolation.

It was in late June 2021 when Evi, at her home in Bekasi, a satellite city in southern Jakarta, heard via a WhatsApp message from her mother that her father's condition was worsening. Like thousands of Jakartans, Evi's father had contracted the novel coronavirus and was now suffering from the effects of COVID-19. With health care workers being overwhelmed and endless queues at the local *puskesmas* (community healthcare center), and with emergency wards full in every nearby hospital, Evi and her siblings were compelled to find a way to manage her father's health. With each day, chances of finding somewhere adequate for her father's care seemed to diminish. Each phone call to an Emergency Ward (*Instalasi Gawat Darurat*, IGD) was fruitless: Evi was told that there were often as many as 70 patients already ahead of her father in the queue. Yet, after four days of trying, Evi and her siblings managed to find a private hospital bed for their father.

Evi rushed to Bandung to be by his side, bringing her eight-year-old son and husband with her. Evi's father, lying on a hospital bed and short of breath, immediately asked her, "is this true, that patients are being classified as having COVID-19, even when they don't actually have it?" This was termed in Indonesian as 'dicovidkan.' Her father asked further, "is it true that their tests are being falsified, so that the hospitals can receive extra funding from the state government?" Evi, anxious over her father's condition, quickly dismissed his question. Yet, his anxiety and doubt about the integrity of Covid-positive results has haunted Evi ever since, pointing to the persistence of distrust in governmental and medical authorities.

WhatsApp groups were rife with stories, rumors, and news about COVID-19. One of the most circulated rumors was that hospitals were falsifying the COVID-19 status of patients in order to receive extra funding from the government. Could the government be trusted? Why were leaders taking such different and contradictory approaches to the Pandemic? Evi's parents too, through their Catholic church-based WhatsApp Group, were caught up in dilemmas of working out what to believe and not to believe. In the face of conflicting and inconsistent messaging from various ministries and levels of government, Evi's parents, like many others, were reliant on friends and religious authorities in trying to make sense of the Pandemic and to determine the most appropriate responses.

There was little opportunity or will to debate with her father. Evi's father soon passed away. Despite this personal tragedy, Evi recognizes her own privilege: being a member of the Indonesian middle-class in a big city like Bandung, her father made it to a private hospital and their family had enough money to pay for the care he received. The stratified health system made it easier for the middle class to access the health system; yet treatment for COVID-19 often came too late, and even the best-equipped hospitals were collapsing under the weight of patients.

Moreover, Evi herself, a former editor of *The Jakarta Post*, resigned from her job during the Pandemic, to start up Project Multatuli, a new critical media platform aimed at 'serving the under-reported.' Her own father recognized herself as being capable of mediating the fine line between COVID-anxiety, perpetual disbelief and distrust, and the necessity of taking steps to maintain the well-being of one's family. Evi, within her family, was recognized as having sharp judgement in navigating complex circumstances.

Evi's story is heart-breaking: the anxious search to find care, the confusion and tension between family members about the Pandemic, disagreements on how and when to give care. And then, in the event of her father's death: 'the problematic of mourning.' She came face to face with the question of how a family member could be mourned while maintaining not only COVID-19 protocols, but through also relying on the over-stretched and over-burdened infrastructure and administration of burial or cremation (Mariani 2012). Evi's family was one of millions of Indonesians caught up in the height of the Pandemic in 2021. While Evi's father might have died in a hospital, under the supervision of attentive medical staff, others died on the street or in their homes: some while waiting to be delivered oxygen tanks which they would have to self-administer. While COVID-19 spread rapidly throughout Jakarta in the months of June and July 2021, citizens scrounged for whatever they could to help themselves and those close to them.

Evi and her family came face to face with the lack of resources and health infrastructure that was barely available to members of the wealthy middle-class – let alone the urban poor. Evi's story thus speaks to her privilege: far more common and representative of the Jakartan experience are those stories where people died alone, uncared for, and without having proper medical treatment to ease the worst of the symptoms.

THE PANDEMIC POSES QUESTIONS

Studies on the pandemic in Indonesia have mainly focused on COVID-19 governance and the government's varied conflicting institutions. These studies were especially conducted in the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in Indonesia. Several scholars have argued that the ways in

which Indonesia's government (both local and central government) responded to the COVID-19 pandemic have been heavily securitized or even militarized. The securitization of the pandemic could be seen in government policies, such as restraining information in the pretext of avoiding public panic, using COVID-19 to increase crackdown on critical anti-government voices and dissent, and over-relying on military officers and police in Indonesia's governance of COVID-19 (Chairil 2020a; 2020b). Indeed, the over-reliance on state security apparatus in enforcing COVID-19 measures – especially in social and travel restrictions – has been the persistent feature of the way the Indonesian state handles the pandemic. Meanwhile, Lazuardi (2020) suggests that the enactment of the community-based lockdown is very much entrenched in the long history of urban security mechanisms that relied upon the notion of mutual cooperation, surveillance and suspicion.

When discussing the role of media during the pandemic in Indonesia, scholars have largely turned their attention to the widespread of post-truth narratives – disinformation, fake news, and hoaxes – and news construction of COVID-19 by the authority (Rahmawati et al. 2021, Pambudi et al. 2021, Wahyuni and Fitrah 2022). Little has been known about how ordinary citizens of Indonesia navigate precarious access to health care and how their everyday life has been impacted by securitization and bewilderment caused by the pandemic. Following Strassler's (2020) term 'demanding' in relation to how images 'demand' social-political responses, we use the phrase, 'asks questions,' to the novel and intense situations posed by the COVID-19 Pandemic. How do non-state actors respond to a situation in which the state is only partially, fragmentarily present? In this article, we draw on the experiences of Evi and other Jakartans as a means of gaining access to stories about how the COVID-19 Pandemic was mitigated and securitized.

How has everyday life and access to medical care and information been navigated throughout the Pandemic? Has the securitization and militarization of the Pandemic's management impacted upon the mitigation of the Pandemic? Has the Pandemic called upon a particular kind of 'urban expert' to exercise their agency? What do the stories, which we have managed to glean via Zoom, WhatsApp, and email conversations, tell us about how state and non-state relations are being re-negotiated in the Pandemic and (perhaps) in the post-Pandemic era? We seek to explore the tensions and crossovers between state and non-state actors. To what extent do they call upon each other? How do the conditions, networks, and infrastructures of urban Jakarta facilitate, debilitate, or necessitate collaborations and partnerships between state and non-state actors? How does this Pandemic reconfigure our understanding of securitization within megacities of the global south? Does the state, and the city government fulfil its function of looking after the health of its citizens, and how do citizens securitize, protect their own health or safety when the state is either absent or partial (and compromised) in its efforts at mitigating the impact of a disaster (LaporCovid-19 2021)?

NAVIGATING METAPHORICALLY AND MATERIALLY

We employ the term 'navigating' as a means of framing the way in which citizens of Jakarta have coped, survived, mitigated, and kept the Pandemic at bay throughout 2020-21. The Pandemic has multiplied and complicated the kinds of precarities that are faced in everyday life. Following Vigh (2009), we value the term for how it refers to the act of moving through (progressing or simply staying afloat?) in shifting and changing circumstances. What happens when one's co-ordinates are unreliable? How can one calibrate one's position and circumstances when once-reliable reference points have become untrustworthy? Navigating means moving, making sense in constantly changing circumstances. Who becomes useful in a Pandemic? What kind of resources and networks are mobilized? This kind of hedging one's bets in fluctuating, volatile and precarious conditions, relates to Simone's (2014) appraisal of Jakarta as a city in which *preman* (gangsters) and other urban figures are constantly alert to any number of opportunities or threats and how to make the most of them.

The watery, sea-oriented metaphor of navigation is also particularly apt for Jakarta because of the numerous fronts on which it faces water-related crises. The city occupies the dubious position of being one of the world's fastest sinking cities (Colven 2020). The city, unable to contain the threat from the sea on its north coast, is also subject to 'downstream flooding' (*banjir kiriman*) where heavy rain in West Java province cannot be contained owing to large scale land clearing and deforestation. The water flows into Jakarta where waterways are congested, resulting in large portions of the city becoming flooded almost on a yearly basis. The city becomes, at times, redolent of a dystopic urban environment. Clearing out riverways and removing so-called illegal settlements further exacerbates inequal access to the city and the opportunities Jakarta offers. A much-discussed solution has been to shift the capital to east Kalimantan, which may potentially engender a new environmental catastrophe. We are curious about who sets the course and shapes the conditions which need to be 'navigated.' This partly takes inspiration from de Certeau, with his ideas of strategy and tactics: our navigating agents corresponding to the tactics of urban citizens who make their way through the infrastructured and planned city.

Since COVID-19 was officially acknowledged as being present in Jakarta in March 2020, Jakartans have had to navigate various waves of the Pandemic in their literally sinking city. Flooding and sinking aside, everyday urban life in this megacity of the global south is rife with small negotiations on a micro scale as citizens look to make the most of gaps in infrastructure (Ajidarma 2008) or to capitalize on any network or connection they may have (Simone 2017). Precarity has its corollary in spontaneity, flexibility, creativity, and improvisation (Simone 2004). The gaps in infrastructure, governance, health-care provision, social class, and information are part of how Jakartans have sought to navigate throughout the Pandemic; which has exacerbated, rather than introduced these issues. This involves a negotiation of political conflicts and tensions as well as producing a value, use

or function for others. Vigh also asserts that navigating also involves a temporal logic: a kind of imagining and projection of what the future will hold and what will remain as being useful.

SEPARATION AND EMPATHY

The COVID-19 Pandemic immediately imposed practical limitations on our possibility of doing fieldwork in Jakarta. Zaki was about to welcome his first child and he and his wife made the decision to stay in the Netherlands for the birth and the baby's first months. For Andy, the limitations took the form of a blanket ban on foreigners coming into Indonesia for research. Yet this disruption to research trajectories was insignificant in comparison to working out ways to both avoid contracting the virus and to continue to make one's living. Over time, the steady drip of stories of Indonesia's growing difficulty in facing COVID-19 started to become overwhelming. In May, June, and July of 2020, we both regularly received news of friends and family or colleagues who had either become very sick from the virus and had been hospitalized or had died from COVID-19. Friends in the most comfortable situations imposed their own lockdowns on their everyday life as a means of limiting social contact. They taught their children at home while juggling their own employment.

Much of the news we received came from WhatsApp. Likewise, portraits of recently deceased friends and associates appeared on Instagram accompanied by ubiquitous crying emojis and statements outlining people's memories of the newly departed. "These days are full of *Inna Lillahi*," an Islamic prayer and statement uttered after someone's death, which then became a common refrain. The steady flow of these messages in WhatsApp, the grief expressed via Instagram, and the almost macabre details of events unfolding in Jakartan hospitals jarred our sense of the Pandemic's trajectory in the Netherlands.

At that time, when health care facilities were overwhelmed and even collapsed, one of our biggest concerns and anxieties had been the difficulty and the complexity of the access to health care for our family and friends. We were also worried about the phenomenon of vaccine hesitancy among some of our friends and relatives, which could further increase their health risk and vulnerability. This health-related anxiety and insecurity that we experienced are also telling in the sense that our feelings cannot escape from class bias. For instance, the fact that we were much worried about health insecurity rather than economic insecurity, such as losing jobs and being unemployed for our family and friends, suggests that our social class's position significantly shaped our sense of insecurity during the pandemic. Indeed, as part of the Indonesian middle-class, most of our family and friends work in salaried and formal employment, which is less affected by the economic hardship caused by the pandemic.

Around us, we saw a tremendous faith in the hospital system's capability to rise during the Pandemic which enabled a policy of keeping everyday life as open as possible through the application of a light and smart lockdown. What we saw around us felt incongruent with the sense of sickness and death elsewhere. The Pandemic has indeed been global but the manner in which it has been experienced has been highly pluralized. Our article originates from this desire to see how people orient themselves in a time of insecurity, scarcity, and an unknown health crisis. How are resources and information made use of, or indeed, created and restructured, when trust in established authorities has become diluted?

RE-SHAPING JAKARTA

The COVID-19 pandemic, despite its scale, is one of numerous *krisis* or *darurat* (crisis, emergency) amongst numerous others in the post-authoritarian era of 1998 onwards. The term *krisis* sticks in the contemporary vernacular in terms of *krisis moneter* (financial crisis), *krisis politik* (political crisis), *krisis kepercayaan* (crisis of trust), to more recent formulations such as *krisis kesehatan* (health crisis), and *krisis komunikasi* (crisis of communication). Disasters too have been all-too-frequent markers of the recent years: the tsunami of 2004 in Aceh and the earthquake of 2006 in Java; the Merapi volcanic eruption in 2006 and 2010, numerous earthquakes in Java, Sumatra, and Sulawesi.

The COVID-19 Pandemic is also not the first pandemic in recent memory: bird flu and swine flu both having an impact on Indonesia. Separately, flooding throughout Jakarta is a yearly, if not seasonal, hazard. Living with this kind of precarity and vulnerability to a combination of natural and human-made disasters or crises positions the COVID-19 Pandemic as being another crisis on the spectrum of many others. Sri Mulyani, the Indonesian Finance Minister has stated, "something different about this crisis is the large-scale lockdown" (CNN Indonesia 2020). It causes its own kind of shock because it hasn't happened before. So, we have to think about what we are going to do, two or three steps into the future." The Pandemic is proving to be a "long moment of crisis" which is reshuffling social relations and urban fabrics: that is, it has a "transformative function" (Low and Smart 2020).

Prior to the emergence of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia, the nation's health system was already stretched through its low doctor-patient ratios, just being one of several indicators of a limited health infrastructure. Indonesia, arguably, has faced unique challenges in tackling the Pandemic: a huge geographical expanse, incredibly diverse population of language groups, ethnicities, religious followers, not to mention a fractious and tense political environment. Yet in some ways, Indonesia has followed a common trajectory to other nations. From underplaying the presence or impact of the virus in the early days, implementing a lockdown of sorts (in Indonesia known as Large-Scale Social Restrictions, *Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar: PSBB*) and then strategically emerging

from it, to securing a vaccine agreement with China and other vaccine producers' countries. Political leaders such as President Joko Widodo and Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan have used the Pandemic as a means of asserting their political authority. Rivalries between governors and the central government have also played a role in shaping responses to COVID-19 at different levels of governance.

Marco Kusumawijaya (2021), a prominent urbanist and political activist working in urban Jakarta, argues that there is a tension and internal conflict between the national and the regional/provincial government in the governance of the pandemic. He said that many provincial governors throughout Indonesia wanted to implement tighter lockdown from the very beginning of the pandemic. Nevertheless, their plan was rejected by the national government which preferred to consider other aspects such as the economy, the tourism industry, and infrastructure projects. His voice resonates with the view that suggests responses to the pandemic have been the product of ongoing contestations between various and contradictory social groups at different governance levels – national, local and community – within the context of political decentralization (Meckelburg and Bal 2021).

As a nation with some 70 million informal workers (Susanty and Makur 2020), a harsh and long-term lockdown was always going to be hard to implement on a national scale. Many communities enforced their own *lockdown mandiri* or self-organized lockdowns. These are lockdowns which were implemented and policed by local communities. Blockades and barriers were put up at entrances to kampungs (dense, informal urban environments) to prevent outsiders from coming in. Visitors were subject to screening and rigorous health protocols: wearing masks, washing hands, and sometimes, being sprayed with disinfectant. Following health protocols took on a highly performative dimension and were part of a general sentiment, that, given the inaction and confused strategies from the central government, there was a growing realization that local communities would have to make their own decisions about how to police their communities.

In Jakarta, as in other cities in Indonesia, the police called on informal security actors such as *preman* (gangster; hoodlum) and *jawara* (local thugs) to aid in the enforcement of health protocols (Arrobi 2020). The resilience and innovation of communities in north Jakarta (amongst others) has proved to be a vital resource for mitigating the absences of state support (Wilson 2020). Marco (2021) revealed to us that his NGO, Rujak Centre for Urban Studies, has been working in advocating the provision of piped water for urban dwellers in North Jakarta.

Rujak's advocacy is fulfilled by the Jakarta's government by providing free water, refilled everyday by using a truck, and currently by permanent water tanks. This program was closely linked to his role as the chair of the committee for coastal planning (TGUPP Pesisir) in which he designed a planning on

coastal areas, including connecting transport system, providing piped water, and protecting the residents from seawater rising. Ironically, Marco suggests that to a certain degree, the Pandemic has been used to advocate for the improvement of justice for the urban poor dwellers in Jakarta. He said that: “strangely, (the) people have asked for this (clean and piped water), for a very long time and it was not provided until the pandemic took place” (Kusumawijaya 2021).

The pandemic has also played a role in shaping everyday life and the physical make-up of the city. Under the lockdown, mosques and churches have been eerily quiet, while religious leaders have become pivotal figures in conveying protective health measures. Banners, murals, and signs have sprung up on city streets, creating a visual reminder of efforts to combat the spread of the virus and at times to critique the government’s handling of the Pandemic. The pandemic has also left its mark on the urban landscape in other ways: the Wisma Atlet in Kemayoran, used for the Asian Games in 2018, has been turned into a make-shift hotel for COVID-19 patients in self-isolation. According to Marco, this is only possible since Jakarta is in the privileged position of having many government buildings and facilities which can be used for self-quarantine.

Cemeteries in northern Jakarta and elsewhere have been filled up, forcing new land to be cleared. The gravediggers themselves have, in some cases, been ostracized by their communities as being potential transmitters of COVID-19. LaporCovid-19, a civil society initiative which advocates the fulfilment of health and human rights during the pandemic, reports that not only have some 20,000 deaths not been officially recorded in Indonesia’s toll, but thousands of health care workers – doctors, nurses, orderlies – have perished in their own efforts to treat the sick and ailing.

The terms *kewalahan* and *kekurangan*, have become some of the key terms of the pandemic. Hospitals have been overwhelmed (*kewalahan*) with patients; while patients suffer from a lack of (*kekurangan*) access to adequate facilities, oxygen. Doctors, too, lacked the resources to treat the patients. The resilience and ingenuity of non-state actors is a key strategy for mitigating various state absences. The work of Irma Hidayana, outlined below, is one example where a kind of data-driven activism has emerged in the wake of governmental denial and disinformation about COVID-19.

A NEW PLATFORM AMONGST IN THE MEDIASCAPE

Starting a new media platform during a pandemic sounds like a risky venture. Yet for Evi and her cohort, the pandemic and the click-bait driven mediascape demanded an alternative platform – what she refers to as “slow journalism.” In contrast to rapidly escalating Coronavirus clusters and fake news spreading like wildfire through social media, Evi and her fellow journalist friends initiated a

platform which sought to provide an antidote to the sensationalist and polarizing coverage of the pandemic. Evi (2021) outlines her logic in founding Project Multatuli:

[The foundation happened] with several friends, three other journalists, I founded Project Multatuli, which is a public-service journalism initiative. We want to tap into a news-desert or a niche. So we serve ... So, we decided to focus our journalism on serving the under-reported. Hold power accountable. We launched the website in May and so far I think we have published maybe, 30-40 [articles] because we believe in slow journalism. Only three articles per week. We founded Project Multatuli because we see that the media industry in Indonesia has already been controlled predominantly by politically wired tycoons operating in a market-driven logic. Like click-bait. Worshipping traffic so much that it takes a toll on quality journalism. Armchair journalism. Viral articles are hogging the space right now. So, we see that as a problem. So, we want to disrupt that status quo in journalism. We don't want to follow the journalism that serves the elite more; more male-centric and more Jakarta-centric. We want to veer away from that concept. I'm calling Project Multatuli as a disruption to the status quo in journalism.

As Lim (2013, 653) demonstrates in her insightful study, media activism in contemporary Indonesia, including social media-based social movement, must conform to the dominant ideological meta narrative – such as religion and nationalism – and popular culture in order to be successful. It should also follow the principles of popular culture consumption such as light packaging, having a headline appetite and trailer vision. These qualities make it susceptible to being too fast, too thin and lost amongst the digital noise. In this sense, Evi is acutely aware of the peril of media activism in contemporary Indonesia. Her Project Multatuli presents a new kind of media activism that both counters the interest of power holder and speed-driven journalism that provide little space for advocating public interest.

Project Multatuli, thus, becomes a kind of vessel with which to navigate not only the Pandemic but the mediascape and the complexities of post-authoritarian era Jakarta. Evi recognizes the biases which are both gendered and Jakarta-centric, and while Jakarta cannot be dissolved from its conceptualization, the city is represented from perspectives which counter its construction as the centrality of national identity.

The following section addresses a different kind of media platform which performs a relatable kind of media activism. While Project Multatuli focuses on narratives and stories from the perspectives of the marginalized, LaporCovid-19 focuses on data and scientific-based analyses of the Pandemic.

LAPORCOVID-19 AND DATA-DRIVEN ACTIVISM

Having successfully defended her dissertation in New York in late 2019, Irma Hidayana was happy to be back home with her musician husband and son in the compact and architecturally designed house in a leafy suburb in the south of Jakarta. Irma's PhD looked at the role of the baby food industry and its role in maternal and infant health outcomes. Although neither being a (medical) doctor, nor an epidemiologist, Irma was well-acquainted with the strengths and weaknesses of Indonesia's health system. Yet, by February 2020, Irma recognized that something was going awry with her government's response to the emerging global COVID-19 Pandemic. The first tell-tale sign was the denial that COVID-19 was present in Indonesia, despite the modelling of epidemiologists indicating otherwise.

Flippant statements from senior government figures stating that COVID-19 could be kept at bay through prayers and eating local foods, became all the more galling when she heard stories amongst her friends and their networks of people getting seriously sick and developing Covid-like symptoms. Newly released from the discipline and strictures of PhD-life, Irma found herself armed with both the skill set and network for articulating an alternative response to the unfolding health crisis as Indonesia – like so many other countries – lurched into uncharted, covid-saturated waters. LaporCovid-19, which she established with both close friends and a broader pool of volunteers, has become one of the main resources for gaining a sense of the scale of the Pandemic's impact in Indonesia.

Irma and LaporCovid-19 emphasize that the military involvement in handling the pandemic in Indonesia has been ineffective, unnecessary, and prone to corruption. Irma provides an example of how the military is involved in the procurement of COVID-19 testing kits, the intelligence agency's initiative to develop COVID-19 drugs, and the mobilization of security forces in rolling out mass vaccinations. Furthermore, Irma suggests that some military officers have been used to intimidate health workers (*tenaga kesehatan, nakes*) who protested about the long delay of their incentive payment. Irma's point is amplified by Marco who affirms that the government has the tendency to treat the pandemic with a heavy-handed security approach. Both Irma (2021) and Kusumawijaya (2021) pointed out how the state intelligence agency (*badan intelijen negara/BIN*) has been involved in the distribution of *bansos* (social aid) as well as in the development of so-called *vaksin Merah-Putih* (Red and White Vaccine, in reference to the national flags of Indonesia), which is proclaimed as a locally produced vaccine in Indonesia. Meanwhile, Marco suspects that the state apparatus attempts to manufacture the narrative that the people are *bandel* (stubborn) and not following the health protocols; thus, the government is given legitimacy to mobilize the police and military officers to discipline the unruly people. Irma also critiques the government and military for their role in the procurement of vaccines.

In January 2023, Irma reflected on her work with LaporCovid-19. It had created an enabling function. Irma frames it in this way:

[F]rom the beginning, LaporCovid invited a wide range of health workers to participate in LaporCovid. Through their work at LaporCovid, people with different backgrounds, such as public health scientists in particular, became more aware and engaged. They took part in responding to the pandemic policy advocacy. This was a role that they had never taken on before. Most of them had only used to work on their own research studies and in their laboratories without paying much attention to public health-related policy. LaporCovid enabled them to actively (and very quickly) 'translate' their research findings into informing public health policy. This is why I would say that we've been able to 'create' new 'actors' in the democratic process. This is because the (public) health sector used to be pre-occupied with its own world and didn't want to be associated with any politics of public health – unlike activists and journalists.

Their voices were not always welcome. LaporCovid contributors also faced resistance, intimidation and doxing from various health organizations who did not appreciate the closer scrutiny of what was going on. Irma told us (2021):

We would collect data and then write up reports. We send all data and reports to the government authorities both at the local and national levels. To the Ministry of Health, we send health-related reports and complaints. For issues on education during the pandemic, we send the reports to the Ministry of Education. For general issues, we'd send the reports to the COVID task force. We'd seek meetings with the Health Ministry and then follow up with what steps were being taken. Our proactive stance wasn't always appreciated, so to say. The ChatBot function we had on our website also proved to be particularly useful in harvesting complaints from different sectors. Nurses who didn't receive their COVID-19 bonuses, for example, informed us of the hospital that hadn't fulfilled their obligations. We were able to pressure the health services in order for the nurses to receive their appropriate pay. But these efforts weren't always successful. The new labor laws, enacted via the so-called Omnibus Law [implemented during the Covid Pandemic], have made it easier to fire workers, or at least, not renew their contracts. So, while it has been possible to say that new actors were able to positively contribute to health policy and the like, there has also been worrying trends in anti-democratic steps taken by the Widodo government.

The COVID-19 Pandemic created a moment in which digital innovation could prosper and emerge as a vital means for conveying detailed information of what was transpiring on the ground. At the same time, political and military elites doubled down on protecting their own interests – witnessed through the implementation of the Omnibus Law and the militarization of social aid. Irma Hidayana and her colleagues were equipped with both the digital media skills required to create a platform to service immediate health needs, while also savvy enough to negotiate the pressure applied to them from governmental authorities. While democratic regression may be a trait of the Widodo era, a variety of forms of resistance remain in play, LaporCovid being one of them.

CONCLUSION

Navigating involves moving in shifting, watery and changing circumstances. We navigate with our own tools: a particular skillset, education, or financial capability. Our interviews with Evi and Irma delineate the various ways in which they have been navigating Pandemic-era Jakarta. Our informants have projected the relevance of their skills and the likelihood of their utilization as a means of determining their next moves.

Echoing the Suharto era affectation of ‘everything is calm and stable,’ the early days of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia were rooted in denial that the virus had spread to the Archipelago. President Widodo took a proactive step and mobilized his buzzers to deflect attention away from the (likely) chaos that the Pandemic would (and did) cause. Media activists such as Evi Mariani and Irma Hidayana recognized, however, a countering role for the media. Project Multatuli and LaporCovid have provided new avenues for expressing critiques of contemporary social and political conditions in Indonesia. While throughout the Suharto-led New Order era (1966-1998) publications could be censored through the withdrawing of the ‘publishing license,’ censorship in the reformasi era and beyond has taken on much more diverse and varied forms. LaporCovid-19 received intimidation and resistance for its willingness to represent the causes of under-paid health workers. Project Multatuli runs courses for its writers in how to deal with bullying, intimidation, and harassment from the police.

Jakarta plays a role in shaping its citizens’ movements and livelihood, while each of them negotiates and mediates their relationship with the city. However, they are not limited by Jakarta. Evi lives at its periphery, avoiding its congestion and taking advantage of the comfort of her home office in suburban, southern Jakarta. While Irma, whose home is also at Jakarta’s periphery, remains mobile in this Pandemic time: travelling back and forth to the United States where she works as an occasional lecturer while her husband pursues his PhD. Her distance does not impinge upon her running of LaporCovid-19; virtuality has been absorbed into her everyday life.

The idea of navigating brings with it an idea of a destination, a final harbor where the vessel will 'find its shelter.' The Indonesian language term for this is *berlabuh*. We find that in navigating everyday life throughout the Pandemic, our informants find shelter not in some kind of imagined 'post-Pandemic' but instead through the creation of new platforms and utilization of skillset. The shelter is in the navigating the precarities and crises precipitated and deteriorated by COVID-19, rather than at an imagined, distant harbor of a solution. Rather than being unique, discreet, and fixed, new crises will evolve, which will need to be navigated in their own ways. Project Multatuli and LaporCovid, which have their origins in Covid-era Jakarta, are two means with which to navigate the evolving threats to democratization.

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